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ABSTRACT

This paper presents excerpts from the author's diary describing the experiences encountered while conducting the Theater Workshop Project, a project designed for enhancing the literacy of homeless mothers and children. The project's objectives and techniques are to: (1) use storytelling in the shelters as an entertaining vehicle to begin to build the aural foundations of literacy (attention span, imagination, translation of sound to image, knowledge of narrative forms of literature, contact with the special language of literature, and building cultural pride and critical thinking skills through comparison of cultures and the folk genres that spring from them); (2) use acting as a vehicle for the children to express themselves in their own words, using narrative forms; and (3) run a simultaneous reading, writing, critical thinking laboratory for mothers, which combines study of children's literature and child development with the study of folklore and adult literature from the African American tradition to achieve an intergenerational literacy program. The workshops cover issues related to child development and reading behaviors that the mothers can use to get their children to enjoy reading. (GLR)

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The Theater Workshop Project:

Experiences in Enhancing the Literacy of Homeless People

a program of Women In Need, Inc.
Funded by the Robert Bowne Foundation

by
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Project Director

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Objectives for the Theater Workshop Project:

1. To use storytelling in the shelters as an entertaining vehicle to begin to build the aural foundations of literacy: attention span, imagination, translation of sound to image, knowledge of narrative forms of literature, contact with the special language of literature, the building cultural pride and critical thinking skills through comparison of cultures and the folk genres that spring from them.

2. To use acting as a vehicle for the children to express themselves in their own words, using narrative forms. To help the children become comfortable and fluent in new uses of English that do not spring from their culture of origin, i.e. Standard English, and the special language styles of written English.

3. To run a similtaneous reading, writing, critical thinking lab for mothers which combines study of children's literature and child development with the study of folklore and adult literature from the African American tradition, in order to achieve an intergenerational literacy program. The children are available in the next room for experimentation with reading aloud and with choice of age appropriate books.

Implementation:

The Children's and Mothers' class at Abraham Residence:

Six volunteers arrive at 7 P.M. every Monday night and proceed down to the lounge where we have our library case. I assemble the mothers, participating children and the volunteers, and tell a story. It is one that I want to share with the children, and which will form the foundation of the discussion portion of the mothers' workshop. I ask them all to listen and ask the mothers to analyze it for style of language, motif, and cultural content. At 7:30 the mothers and I leave for our classroom in the cafeteria, and I pair up the volunteers with the children I want them to work with that evening. I discuss which books might serve their child's age and interests, open the bookcase and go. In the mothers' classroom we begin by analyzing the story. Would you tell this to your children? Why or why not? What does it mean? Does it remind you of anything in your life? Can you make a proverb or moral from it? Is the sense of justice in the story and in the culture that created the story correct from your point of view? If not, why not? Can you write down your ideas in a few sentences? Etc. Then we move on to our selected reading for the night, usually a folktale in the same genre we've been working in, but from another culture, or a story from the African-American tradition. We include contemporary American black authors, especially women. However, we have done O. Henry, Charles Dickens, Margery Williams, in addition to Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, Lerone Bennett, Jr. etc. We take the last half an hour to reunite the mothers and children and allow the mothers time to read children's books to the whole group while I encourage successful reading behavior. The women also read to their own children and choose books to take home and experiment with at bedtime.

Our accomplishments include high attendance, and respect among the mothers. Our lending rate of books is high, and we cover a great deal of ground around issues of child development and reading behaviors that the mothers can use to get their children ready to enjoy reading. The care of our books has been excellent as has been the rate of returned volumes.

Disappointments occur when I misread or overtax the women's reading levels, or bring up a subject that is close to home but does not have the distancing properties inherent in folklore. Yet, I am able to introduce difficult subjects in literature ranging from slavery in THE PEOPLE COULD FLY, to "the Great White Hope." in I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS, to hunger and bad mothers in HANSEL AND GRETEL, with great success. The attraction to literature that I am trying to point out is that is DOES deal with difficult material, but that the beauty of the writing, emotion and resolution is what makes the discomfort with the subject worthwhile. The putting into words of a personal truth is something that they have loved from day one. My most notable failure, however, has been with THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD, by Zora Neale Hurston, which was difficult to read and which made the women feel self conscious about their own speech patterns in English. I was aghast, since the point was to illuminate the beauty of community uses of English. The women have made it clear that they want skills, and one of them is better command of standard English. So we concentrate now on forms of literature that use this.

My Diary of Workshop Sessions:

At Abraham Residence, January 6

We talked about rich language using the Barett's Animals Should Definitely Not Wear Clothing. The moms loved the jokes and the alliteration, also the fancy language. They wanted their kids to be able to use standard English, and read it comfortably. One mother and I sang Three Blind Mice to a nine month baby. We began by reciting the story and the kid liked it, but when we began to sing the kid was all ears, and clapped and tried to sing. Euthenia, 4 months pregnant, observed our success. We talked about what books she should read to her unborn baby. Idea that the gestating baby begins to identify mother's voice in the womb. Idea of rhyme - used mother goose. I gave Euthenia a version of Mother Goose and she read it all to a six month old, and then to herself. She read Kapiti Plain out loud to herself. Both women were delighted with my praise and with a chance to perform for the group. We talked about all the things they did well and about how reading to her infant would make sure that by the time he hits preschool, he knows what books are for and that reading is something Mom does all the time. We talked about how what we were doing was becoming the baby's first experience with a book and that it would always be associated with mom, love and fun. We talked about the needs in our society for kids with good verbal skills and good reading skills. It worked because we could see the children having fun, and responding to books. Told Hansel and Gretel in a special way with a new twist on the father's blindness to the worth of the children, and then when the kids come back with gold and jewels, he ignores the loot, realizing the the treasure is the children. I was smokin' and word got around.

Abraham Feb 10

I tried Zora Neale Hurston on the women and they hated it. Too big a difference suddenly between our races and experiences. Hurston writes in dialect and is Alice Walker's inspiration. How could I have predicted that the dialect would be so hard to read that it would make everyone self conscious? Linda Williams, one of the leaders of women said, "This is trash talk. Low class. We probably talk like that when we trying to talk good English." Their anger level rose, and instead of backing off quickly and returning to the Cinderella cycle I introduced last week, I keep plowing on with Zora. At the last minute I switched to Ashenputtel. They read the Manheim translation like champs. They loved it. But thought it too violent and said that that must be why Germany produced Hitler, if this stuff is what's in the German imagination.

Abraham Febuary 17

Paydirt. The women are back. Tonight I read a Chinese version of Cinderella to the group and asked them to think and listen to the differences in spoken and written English. They sat their with their eyes shut to concentrate. The kids and the volunteers were there too. I was scared that I wouldn't be able to hold them. Then I went into the kitchen with the moms and Teresa borrowed the Chinese fairy tale from me for her book report. I was thrilled. Last semester I worked intensely with her, one on one, for several hours every week on her reading. Then,whenever she saw any Chinese characters in books, she make fun of them.

There was so much self loathing in her. She couldn't read because she felt she couldn't make a mistake - thus, no experimentation and no learning. We worked hard together, and became reading partners so I could sit with her and model the reading strategies I wanted her to pick up. Many ups and downs over the months but it was one of the best things I ever did for anybody. The kid hooked into the fun and the release of books, and her mother told me she got her first excellent evaluation this term. So here she is borrowing a Chinese fairytale about a poor kids who makes out fine in the end. I am so proud of this kid. Fairytale really work! Bettleheim is right. A kid can project herself right into the task of the story and has a vested interest in seeing what happens. You can't help yourself, which is why the stories stay around. Motivation is everything in reading. That and kind and complete attention from a caring parent or teacher or adult. I have given Ilene Lawence, an excellent volunteer, charge of Teresa's work during story hour. I want Teresa not to only associate me with this pleasure, and to own the process for herself. This is paying off in a new relationship with her mother, Margaret. Now that Teresa has latched on to academics it has forged a new connection to her mother, who is in school and values education highly. The child is displaying independent learning behaviors and more childlike behaviors which are appropriate to her age as opposed to tightly controlled imitation adult behavior which masked her terror. She cries now, and she never did when I first met her. She said she wasn't allowed to, and that in her culture it was not done. Yet now she lets herself go sometimes and I have noticed Margaret treating her gently at these times. I modeled it by saying to the crying child, "Go ahead, honey. It's ok, you are a kid. I care if you are unhappy. Go ahead and cry." I would do this whether Margaret was nearby or not.

Monday there was a fight between Vester and Teresa over the last cookie, which Teresa wanted to save for Melody. I rescued the precious cookie and Teresa from Vester, and Teresa burst into tears. Her head against the wall, she wept, and I drew her against me to cry. Margaret came in and said, "Teresa, what is it?" I sent her over to her mother, saying, "It's alright Teresa, your mother is here." I steered her into her mother's arms and Margaret held her tenderly. Picking on the Ma kids is not going to happen in my class. In fact, no one going to get picked on here.

We've been working hard to help Jade not yell at and mishandle her children during class. Jade gets so frustrated. She believed at one time that a two year old has the same reasoning capacity as an adult, but is just more willful and bad. So I've been modeling behavior and talking about child development a lot in class. Recently Lionel was crying about something, and I saw Jade control her temper and tone of voice, giving him a time out instead of yelling at him or grabbing him. Every little step helps. I gave her a big hug in front of class and explained what Jade was learning to everyone. We have several students who are abusive to their children and have open files with the Child Welfare Agency. I am supporting the efforts of Women In Needs STOPP program as well as providing positive modeling and group reinforcement for displays of good parenting.

Abraham, February 24

We have new books on long term loan from the Library for new readers. These are going like hotcakes. We talked about Maya Angelou this week and it was a very big test for me. We did the Joe Louis fight scene from I Know Why the Caged Bird

Sings. Here I am, a white woman talking about the history of civil rights, the "great white hope" fight. I see eyes narrow to slits. The payoff is in Angelou's writing, with Joe Louis' win signifying the black race as the strongest on earth. Every copy of the book that we had was borrowed that night, all the Alice Childress too.

And fairy tales. The women are sick of practicing with kids books so now it is time to use the folklore for cultural purposes - giving things to pass on to kids that are African-American contributions to culture. Also, since they love the European fairytales, especially when there is an African equivalent, we will do those. Told Cinderella from Haiti, and Cinderella from Senegal.

February 30 Abraham

We do a new thing. We all begin together, moms, children, volunteers and I tell a story. Then the mom's group goes off and I get to supervise which children stay with the volunteers and who comes with us. All infants with us and most of the toddlers who can be placated or put to sleep with a story and a cookie. It sets the tone for the volunteers and kids. It gives the moms a starting point for discussion. The dads like it too, and mostly stay with the kids to look at books, but sometimes come in with us. I like them with the kids, reading, so the women can let their hair down. Then after 45 minutes we go back to share books with the kids and to choose books to borrow and try out. So far my idea of a notebook for responses isn't working out. The women don't bring them and won't write in them. That's the next phase, and I will begin modelling that during class.

March 2 Abraham

Tonight there was chaos because a woman was having a child and her other children were being placed in temporary foster care. It was hell. The mothers had been feeding, hiding and taking care of the kids and had grown attached to them. They were sacrificing to feed them because they were afraid that CWA would take the kids away permanently as the mother had an open file with them. Maria interupted the lesson to take the kids, then to come and explain what would be happening to them. No separation, only temporary placement. This released a flood of tears from the women who had experienced foster care themselves. It brought up personal stories from all the women, so I scrapped my lesson (I am getting smarter) and listened. Then I told the story of Moses in the rushes and how an African (Egyptian) queen found the baby. They quieted down and I mentioned that they had all acted like the queen in the story on behalf of Jeanine's kids. Then I told, THE PEOPLE COULD FLY. This is a slave tale of preservation of the spirit in spite of slavery. The women understood it. That capped the night and it was almost too painful. One of the mothers got up and ran out during the story, but everybody else allowed the story to wash over them.

March 9

Full attendance. Mothers who can't make it come to me and greet me anyway. Big fight in the cafeteria before the session, so I thought the night would be a write off. But no, even though the noise at the top of the night is deafening, we manage

to pull it together. I begin to let these things roll off me, and if I do, so do the volunteers. Showed the class a paper bag full of paper cranes and asked them what they were. Responses: Tea bag papers? Wind chimes that don't make any noise? Little dragons? Kite tail? I wrote all their ideas down and told them that they were paper cranes, what those are and the story of how an Hiroshima survivor gave them to me. The women recoiled. I said, "Well, that's the real story. I might want to tell it someday to the person I pass these on to. Or I might want to tell a story about a kite tail made out of tea bag paper dragons." They looked puzzled. I asked them what they thought the cranes were worth. "Since they are a gift there are priceless, even though they are worth nothing." I told the story of the Grateful Crane, a Japanese tale every kid knows. It is about duty and in it, a crane freed from a trap repays the old couple who freed her by appearing at their door in the form of a woman and asking to work for them. She weaves beautiful cloth every night and they sell it and soon become rich. She insists that they never watch her though, yet, because she is getting thinner and thinner, they do watch her one night to see that she is actually the crane, using her own feathers to weave into the cloth. The crane flies away once she has been discovered.

I asked the women to tell me what the story means. Deborah Fowler said it means that when you are ready for life you are ready for death. I ask her how. She says, it isn't proper to be sad for the crane's sacrifice. She is using herself in her work, living for her art like a jazz musician does. Alive in the work. That is the greatest freedom there is. (I was floored.)

I ask the women to make a quick connection between the crane and Joe Louis. They say, he sacrificed his body for our freedom. He took the blows to become great. The crane is also a heroine because her work will last forever.

I am going to start doing a savior/hero cycle soon. They will be great at this.

We read the German and French version of Cinderella out loud. The women say enough already, let's do something African.

Fine. I bring in Virginia Hamilton's version of the black folktale, THE PEOPLE COULD FLY. We talk about whether or not to use THE PEOPLE COULD FLY with children. Roanda says yes, absolutely. Linda says no, it is too painful. Another says, if I want my kids to know where we've come from incase they start messing up in school or something, I will. Another says, it reminds me that my grandmother and great-grandmother were raped by white men. I say, we all know that rape has traditionally run white on black and not like the stereotype. Amen, say the women. The women wonder if the story will give the kids bad dreams about slavery and about white people with whips. After all the overseer in the story whips a young mother. They conclude that it may, and it worries them. Linda says, are the people who fly all dead in the story? Isn't that why they fly away? Of course, says another. No one can fly. They are dead and their spirits are flying away. I say, what if it is their spirits that are freed and their bodies that remain in slavery? What if the story is about keeping your hope alive? The women consider this and think this interpretation might be better for their children. I say, what if they really just fly away, and the ones left behind are the ones who have no imagination? We talk for a long time and they take the copies of the Virginia Hamilton version of the story home with them. They pronounce the language lovely, and I hear them reading aloud in jazz rhythms. Nice.

Transcript of March 9:

We read THE PEOPLE COULD FLY by Virginia Hamilton and discuss it. The following is most of the conversation of the night. There was a lot of lively discussion that overlapped, and that has not been transcribed because it wasn't clear enough on tape.

Geanine - My grandmother and great-grandmother was raped by a white man.

Me - We know that that's the way rape has run, during Jim Crow and after, it was used to terrify folks. We know that that didn't go black to white, but white on black, that kind of crime. Geanine, because that's a real story, can you conceive of a time when it would be ok to tell it, when you might want someone to know or you might not want to forget it? Could it be a story you would tell?

Linda - you could tell it someday so that the children would not forget where they come from. So that they not forget the holocaust, you know what I'm saying? I'm saying you have to be very careful how you explain. To be honest with you, I don't know how to explain it to my children, I think I would need help with that, you know what I'm sayin? I think I would, see, I would pass on my resentment, and I wouldn't want to do that, know what I'm saying?

Me - Yes, ma'am.

Linda - I would need help with that.

Me - You think a story like this (THE PEOPLE COULD FLY) which is far enough away, would do? It's based on a real story, but it's not a real story, obviously. Something where the language is removed, like the folk tales, might be a way of doing it?

L - Uh-huh.

Me -It's different than saying, "Listen, honey, don't ever forget."

L - That would make a way of including you and make a path. To explain it to the child much better.

Me - Is there a value in making beauty out of something this painful?
Can you. Does this story strike you as beautiful in any way.

Geanine- In a sense. In they got theyself free, they got they freedom. So that's beauty, ok. In a sense it's like telling you got to strive for what you want to be.

Me - Yup. Any different meanings on the story?

Linda - Yes. Because I'm saying, this a downtrodden people.

Roanda - And we always saying, one day, one day, and one day that freedom did come.

G - Yeanh.

Linda - They trying to say, these people died, right?

M - I don't know! It might. You saying that what actually happened is that these people were killed and that their spirits were freed?

L - Uh-huh.

Me - I never got that.

L - Their spirits, cause that's a going back inside story. People die and rise, you know what I'm saying?

Chanel- And the other ones that were left back were alive. Because they didn't cry out loud. They were left but they believe in theyself.

Me - Could it be that the people who flew were those who kept hope alive? And the ones left behind died inside?

Roanda - Their spirits were destroyed.

Linda - Ok. I like that.

Me - What you are doing now, again, ladies, is critical analysis of literature, using your own folk traditions. You know, I mean that this is a jamming on meaning that is just amazing. You are doing college material, college level work. Anybody for a cookie? If you want to tell kids something about belief, this might be...

Roanda - I will use it as a bed time story because at that time we are relaxed. After I put away all the dishes, all relaxed at that time of the night a child could understand it. After the dishes and the laundries, after everything is settled down, that way the child could at least have a little comprehension.

Geanine - But they imagination going to take it and make they own little story, you know what I'm saying? They going to take it and they they will forget part of the story that don't relate to their brain, and they will add to it. And they make up they own little story.

Me - Nice. We are talking about the right time of day to do it. You know how they say that late at night and early in the morning are the two best times to think deep, because you are closer to sleep, closer to the subconscious where feelings live.

Debra - That where the stories come from.

Me - It's a great time for stories to sink in, just before you are going to dream.

Roanda - Dream, right!

Linda - I don't want them having bad dreams about this. They going to think a man with a whip coming to get them.

Roanda - Not neccessarily. They might make something new out of it, and get the point about surviving.

Linda - I would just naturally assume that my children would have bad dreams.

Me - Well, what could you do, if the kid says, "Mommy, did the people all die?" What could you say?

L - Stay tuned next week! (laughter) Wait a minute, I'll research it for you.

R - We could say, "I guess it's something where you use your imagination."

Me - Say it again. Why is it important to throw the process back on the child to make meaning out of it? To put the decision making back on the kid.

Geanine - You're not saying, "I'm telling you." You're saying, "You can do that."

Me - The process belongs to the kid and that will get your kid ready to be a better reader, a better student. All that practical stuff that we need to talk about. But also the experience of beauty, which is the part that moves me. That's a great part of life. And you see, we already know a lot about what's right for kids. A lot about what's really the right way to go about taking care of educating your kids. You see, we don't need an expert, we know what to do. We can figure these things out together. And sometimes imagination is the place where a lot of learning gets done. And also, if your kid gets the rhythm of this language, it just flows like water. So you can put it to use for that reason. "Here's something by an American Black woman that is going to knock your socks off." Virginia Hamilton.

We say goodnight, and go into the children's room to pick out books and to watch their reading progress with the volunteers.

Susan Micari

Susan Micari is an actress who has created a literacy program for women and children for the Women-in-Need shelter system, using improvisation and storytelling as tools to help kids grow passionate about books. A producer of children's programming on WBAI, her storytelling on the radio and interviews with authors of children's books have become popular with listeners of all ages. A featured actress in commercials, soap operas, and films, her most recent part was that of a flirtatious Nazi in the upcoming film, SHINING THROUGH. A former member of The Boston Shakespeare Company, Susan has appeared on New York stages as Avonia Bunn in TRELAWNEY OF THE WELLS, and as Jocasta in OEDIPUS REX. She has taught speech, American literature, and English as a Second Language at Baruch College, and is pursuing a degree in special studies of children from Bank Street College of Education. Susan is, through Women-in-Need, the grateful recipient of a grant from the Robert Bowne Foundation. She may be heard on WNYE 91.5 FM telling stories and discussing literacy issues on April 7 and 9th at 9:45 AM.